

## Foreign Service Wants to Step Up Minority Ranks

\* To boost diversity in its diplomatic corps, the State Department will work with a professional group to host a Los Angeles event.

By Sara K. Clarke, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON -- With a focus on Los Angeles, the State Department is pressing to bolster the number of Latinos, African Americans and other minorities in the U.S. Foreign Service -- the diplomatic force that staffs and manages American embassies abroad.

The department has been criticized for years because of the low number of minorities in its diplomatic corps. But raising awareness in minority communities about Foreign Service careers has been particularly challenging, officials said.

"The people who know about us are the traditional international relations departments of liberal arts colleges," said Nancy M. Serpa, director of the Foreign Service's office of recruitment, examination and employment. "We're trying to find access into certain communities and groups of people who haven't traditionally thought of us."

Typically, East Coast schools like Georgetown and American University in Washington have served as feeder schools for the Foreign Service. But to increase its minority ranks, officials are shifting their focus from traditional college recruitment to other methods -- including professional organizations, trade journals and minority networking groups.

The State Department is collaborating with the Minority Professional Network, a business information website, to host a recruiting event tonight in downtown Los Angeles. The Foreign Service has fared well in hiring Californians, said Diane L. Castiglione, director of recruitment. Los Angeles' diverse population and high concentration of professionals make it a good recruiting ground, she said.

As part of a three-year "diplomatic readiness initiative" started by former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, the State Department has focused on diversity outreach. Before Powell's initiative, about 12% of Foreign Service officers hired were minorities; now, the number is about 21%. The increase in minority staffing comes amid a hiring spurt in which the Foreign Service increased its ranks by 1,200.

"One-quarter of the Foreign Service has been hired in the last five years," Serpa said.

The increase has allowed the Foreign Service to staff new embassies in Afghanistan and Iraq and provided officers with more time for training and learning languages. The Iraq embassy is one of the largest and most difficult U.S. missions, with nearly 4,000 people.

Despite the progress, 5% of the 6,200-member Foreign Service officer corps, or about 300 officers, are African American, Serpa said. Latinos represent 4%, or about 260 officers.

In addition to a lack of awareness, department officials said, economic concerns have hindered minority recruitment. The State Department – which has starting salaries of \$40,000 to \$70,000 per year -- doesn't offer the compensation that talented, highly sought-after minorities can earn in the private sector. "It's probably not very attractive if you've come out of law school and could start at a firm making \$100,000," Serpa said.

Raymond Maxwell, an African American State Department official who has been involved in the recruiting effort, said competition with other employers could impede Foreign Service hiring.

"As time goes on, people of all different industries are going to go after the same core of candidates," Maxwell said. "People have to fight harder, and bring into focus what's great about joining their organization."

Mustafa Popal, an Afghan-born political officer in the Foreign Service, came to the United States in 1987 as a refugee. He worked in the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and witnessed the country's first elections.

"You're a part of something bigger, something historical," he said. Minority candidates bring a "cultural competence" to the job, said Heidi Gomez, who has served in Beijing and San Salvador. Being a first-generation U.S.-born daughter of Honduran parents has helped her overcome the culture shock of living in a foreign country, Gomez said.

Gomez said she also had been well received by high-level contacts in Latin America because they thought she had a personal interest in the well-being of their country.

The presence of a diverse Foreign Service overseas helps break down stereotypes created by Hollywood's portrayal of Americans, Gomez said. "I am the daughter of immigrants, who, with hard work and a little bit of luck, is basically representing her new country overseas," Gomez said. "That's a huge statement to make, because that sort of social mobility really does not exist in a lot of places."

Employees of the Foreign Service must agree to be placed anywhere in the world, although employee interests are considered, Castiglione said. Applicants must be U.S. citizens between ages 20 and 59.

Because of rigorous demands, few applicants make it into the diplomatic corps. Last year, 19,000 took the foreign service exam and 23.1% passed. Applicants who pass the written test go through a screening interview and a security clearance.